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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqx007>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-201510>

Journal Article

Accepted Version

Originally published at:

Zerback, Thomas; Peter, Christina (2018). Exemplar effects on public opinion perception and attitudes: the moderating role of exemplar involvement. *Human Communication Research*, 14(2):176-196.

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**Exemplar effects on public opinion perception and attitudes:
The moderating role of exemplar involvement.**

Journal:	<i>Human Communication Research</i>
Manuscript ID	HCR-16-231.R3
Manuscript Type:	Original Research
Areas of Expertise:	exemplification, persuasion, source expertise, episodic framing

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Abstract

The depiction of citizens expressing their opinions in the news is an increasingly popular feature of modern journalism, because they can serve as exemplars that illustrate abstract or complex issues. However, citizen exemplars differ regarding their level of personal involvement in the issue they talk about. Affected exemplars have some kind of personal experience with an issue (e.g. ill people) whereas unaffected citizens, as ordinary “people-from-the street” do not. We examine for the first time how exemplars’ personal involvement moderates their effects on recipients’ perceptions of public opinion and personal attitudes. The results show that compared to unaffected exemplars, affected exemplars weaken effects on public opinion perceptions. In contrast, the moderating role of exemplar involvement for attitudinal effects was limited.

Keywords: exemplification, episodic framing, persuasion, source expertise

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Exemplar Effects on Public Opinion Perception and Attitudes: The Moderating Role of Exemplar Involvement

Over the past decades, news coverage is increasingly characterized by what Keyser and Raeymaeckers (2012) have called “the rise of the common man” (p. 1). They, and other researchers, have demonstrated that journalists increasingly utilize ordinary citizens as stylistic elements in their news stories (Daschmann & Brosius, 1999; Hopmann & Shehata, 2011; Iyengar, 1991; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), and that their presence in the media has considerably increased over the last decades (Beckers, Walgrave, & van den Bulck, 2016; Keyser & Raeymaeckers, 2012). For example, in their analysis of Belgium television newscasts, Kleemans et al. (2015) find that in 2014 38% of all actors presented in the news were ordinary citizens, compared to only 9% in 1990. In many cases, citizen depictions function as exemplars (Zillmann, 2002, pp. 22–25), illustrating abstract or complex issues, humanizing a topic and offering a more appealing and comprehensible presentation to the audience (Hinnant, Len-Rios, & Young, 2013; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Citizen exemplars can be further categorized according to the degree of their personal involvement in the issue they illustrate: On the one hand, exemplars can have some kind of direct experience with the issue at hand, for example because they are affected by or personally involved in the respective events. Unaffected exemplars, on the other hand, lack such experience with the issue but comment on it nevertheless (Kleemans et al., 2015).

Despite the frequent occurrence of both exemplar types, it is still unclear how exemplar involvement influences well-known exemplar effects. In the present paper, we argue that exemplar effects on recipients’ public opinion perceptions and attitudes (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2000; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997) depend on the exemplars’ level of personal involvement. More precisely, we predict that because of their direct experience with an issue, affected exemplars are perceived to possess higher issue-specific expertise and therefore exert a stronger persuasive effect on recipients’ attitudes than unaffected exemplars

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(Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). At the same time, affected exemplars should be less successful in influencing perceptions of public opinion: Because they usually represent rather small and specific parts of the general public, recipients should generalize their opinions to a lesser degree than those of unaffected exemplars, as the latter are more likely perceived to be “common citizens.”

Consequently, the current study examines the moderating role of exemplar involvement. To do so, it proceeds in two steps: First, after reviewing the existing literature on exemplification and episodic framing, hypotheses are derived regarding the effects of exemplars and the moderating role of exemplar involvement. Second, the results of a 3x2x2 between-subject experiment are reported in which subjects saw exemplars in a newspaper article that dealt with one of three different issues: medically assisted suicide (MAS), burnout (BO), and electric cars (ECAR). Exemplars’ opinions were either in favor or against an issue-related opinion (e.g. pro MAS vs. contra MAS, factor 1) and were either personally affected by the issue or not (factor 2).

Ordinary Citizens in the News

The use of ordinary citizens in news reports is a stylistic element employed by journalists to illustrate complex or abstract issues, because descriptions from the perspective of an individual often make the story more comprehensible for the audience (see e.g. Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Communication researchers look at these citizen depictions from two main theoretical perspectives: framing and exemplification. Both are similar in many ways, but also differ from another, particularly in how they conceptualize the presentation of single cases in media reports and the effects they focus on.

In a very broad sense, the framing tradition is interested in how an issue is presented in the media, which aspects of the issue are made salient and how this presentation affects subsequent audience judgments (Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele, 1999; Springer & Harwood, 2015). In the context of citizen depictions, two types of frames are particularly

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important: *Thematic frames* report on a topic in a rather abstract way, providing general information in a broad context and usually rely on base-rate information such as statistics or poll results. *Episodic frames*, on the other hand, present an issue from the angle of concrete instances, e.g. specific events or individuals that are depicted as case studies. These case studies usually consist of relatively detailed descriptions of individual fates or experiences, depicting people who are directly involved in the issue at hand (e.g., the story of a person becoming unemployed; Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele, 1999; Springer & Harwood, 2015). Regarding possible effects on the audience, framing researchers often look at how thematic or episodic frames influence attributions of responsibility for social problems and therefore recipients' attitudes towards certain policies (e.g. cutting unemployment aid).

In practice, however, news reports are seldom either purely episodic or thematic, but combine single case information with more general information or statistics (Iyengar, 1996; Ostfeld & Mutz, 2014). This combination of information types is the focus of exemplification. Very similar to the episodic framing tradition, exemplification research deals with the depiction and effects of single persons or events presented in the media. The term "exemplar" stems from the notion that individuals are seldom portrayed for their own sake, but in order to exemplify a larger number of people (e.g., the general population), and thus are interchangeable with any other individual from that specific population (Zillmann, 2002, pp. 22–23). Therefore, exemplification typically deals with the quantitative distribution and representativeness of single cases (e.g. single opinions) included in a news report and contrasts it to more objective base-rate information. When looking at the effects of such exemplar depictions, researchers mainly concentrate on perceptions of social reality, e.g. influences on the perceived frequency of certain events, but especially perceptions of public opinion (Arpan, 2009; Bosch, 2014; Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann & Brosius, 1999; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), although some studies also investigate attitudinal effects of exemplars (e.g. Daschmann, 2000).

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Whereas exemplars used to establish an episodic frame are typically stories about involved individuals that share their experience on the issue, exemplification also deals with another type of exemplars, so called *vox populi*—a special type of exemplar made up of a brief opinion statement by a person who is not particularly involved in the issue at hand and without distinct issue-specific knowledge (Beckers et al., 2016). The most common form of these vox pops are so-called “people-on-the-street”-interviews conducted by journalists sampling citizens from the general population in more or less arbitrary fashion. Hence, they do not provide the angle from which a story is told, but rather serve as simplified illustrations of public opinion on the topic (Bosch, 2014; Beckers et al., 2016; Daschmann, 2000).

In comparing both approaches, researchers agree that exemplars are constituting elements of episodic frames (Boukes et al. 2014; Ostfeld & Mutz, 2014; Springer & Harwood, 2015). However, when used in this manner, they exhibit specific characteristics: Exemplars that are part of an episodic frame are typically *affected* by the issue at hand and their case is often described in more detail (e.g. embedded in a coherent story). Exemplification research extends this perspective and additionally deals with *unaffected* individuals (especially vox pops) that merely consist of only brief opinion statements (Bosch, 2014; Beckers et al., 2016; Daschmann, 2000). The following paragraphs offer a closer inspection of exemplar involvement and develops theoretical assumptions regarding its moderating role in exemplar effects.

Exemplar Involvement

Exemplars presented in the media can differ in the way they are personally affected by the issue at hand. *Affected exemplars* have some kind of personal issue-specific experience, for example because they are affected by or personally involved in the respective events, which make them newsworthy on the one hand (Gans, 1979), but at the same time, a very specific part of the population on the other. *Unaffected exemplars*, on the other hand, are

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typically presented as vox pops, when journalists ask passersby for their opinion on a certain topic (also see Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007).

The aforementioned content analysis by Kleemans et al. (2015) shows that the increase of ordinary citizen occurrences in the news is mainly made up of unaffected citizens (1990: 19%; 2014: 61% of all citizen actors present in the news), whereas the share of those affected—while also still high—has considerably decreased between 1990 (70%) and 2014 (25% of all citizen actors present in the news). Furthermore, the type of exemplar journalists use also seems to depend on the topic. For instance, Beckers et al. (2016) demonstrate that vox pops are especially common in political contexts, whereas depictions involving citizens with some kind of personal experience with an issue, more often occur in non-political contexts. Affected exemplars are prominent in other fields as well, most importantly in health campaigns, where they function as a strategic means to inform citizens about health issues or risks and to influence health-related attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Kim, Bigman, Leader, Lerman, & Cappella, 2012; Zillmann, 2006 for an overview). The prevalence and importance of both exemplar types in media coverage and persuasive communication underlines the relevance of asking for the differential effects they might have on the audience. To determine possible consequences of presenting either affected or unaffected exemplars, we will briefly review research on two important exemplar effects: (1) their influence on public opinion perceptions and (2) their persuasive effect on personal attitudes.

Exemplar Effects on Perceptions of Public Opinion

One of the most stable effects of exemplification is that on perceptions of social reality. As part of a more general group or population, an exemplar shares specific attributes with the group that signal which population the exemplar belongs to and, therefore, represents (e.g., “U.S. citizen” or “immigrant”). When an exemplar is perceived as a part of a specific group or population, recipients tend to generalize other characteristics of the exemplar to the population as well (Zillmann, 2002, pp. 22–23). This way, exemplars can influence a wide

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array of social reality judgments, for example, the perceived relevance of social problems (Gibson & Zillmann, 1994), attribution of responsibility (Iyengar, 1991), probability estimates (Hoeken & Hustinx, 2009), risks (Aust & Zillmann, 1996), and—most important to the current study—perceptions of public opinion (Daschmann, 2000; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

As for other judgments about social reality, the influence of exemplars on public opinion perceptions relies on the so-called “representative heuristic” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Zillmann, 2002). This specific form of cognitive processing means that people tend to generalize the attributes of a single case to the population the case is attributed to. In an experimental study, Brosius and Bathelt (1994), for instance, have shown that people’s estimates of opinion distributions in society followed the single opinions voiced by ordinary people in a print article and a radio program they saw. If the exemplars supported, for example, the use of card phones, then participants tended to see higher support for card phone use in the general public as well. The effect increased almost linearly, when additional exemplars expressed the same opinion. Similar effects on public opinion perceptions have also been observed by other researchers (e.g. Daschmann, 2000; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997; Peter & Zerback, 2017; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017). Following this traditional line of exemplar research, we also assume a positive effect of exemplar opinion on public opinion perceptions:

H1: Perceptions of public opinion towards an issue will follow the opinions of exemplars towards that issue.

Why should exemplar involvement moderate exemplar effects on public opinion perceptions? Zillmann and Brosius (2000) point out that the similarity between an exemplar and the population it represents can influence the strength of exemplar effects. Following earlier work by Tversky (1977), they assume that if the degree of similarity between an object and the attributes of a class of objects stored in memory is sufficiently high, the object is considered a member of that class. Consequently, the tendency to generalize from single

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exemplars to a larger population should be more pronounced when similarity increases, i.e. when they share more features (for a similar argumentation see Rothbart & Lewis, 1988; Bosch, 2014; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017). Peter and Zerback (2017) could confirm this by showing their participants different types of exemplars (students vs. elderly people) that stated their opinion on a communal topic and later asked them to assess public opinion on the issue. Their results showed that exemplar effects only occurred when the exemplar and the population whose opinion was estimated (population of students vs. elders) matched. This logic can also be applied to the distinction between affected and unaffected exemplars and their differential effects on public opinion perception. Because affected exemplars often represent specific parts of the general population with specific characteristics (e.g. victims of diseases), they share less features with the general public than exemplars presented as common, unaffected citizens. Hence, compared to unaffected exemplars, recipients should be less willing to generalize the opinions of affected exemplars to public opinion. Therefore, we put forward the following hypothesis regarding the moderating effect of exemplar involvement:

H2: The exemplar effects on public opinion perceptions assumed in H1 are less pronounced for affected exemplars than for unaffected exemplars.

Exemplar Effects on Attitudes

Besides their influence on public opinion perceptions, exemplars can also exert persuasive effects on personal attitudes¹ (e.g. Daschmann, 2000; Kim, Bigman, Leader, Lerman, & Cappella, 2012; Lefevere, Swert, & Walgrave, 2012). Research so far suggests that the power of exemplars relies on the way they are interpreted and processed by the audience. More specifically, it is assumed that exemplars represent vivid, real, and distinctive information and therefore attract the recipients' attention, hence increasing the likelihood for persuasive effects in the first place (Taylor & Thompson, 1982). In addition, the depiction of exemplars and their opinions in the media make them cognitively available and easily

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accessible (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Cognitive accessibility, in turn, is known to increase the perceived validity of the opinion conveyed and the likelihood that information is integrated in the judgment at hand (e.g., Domke, Shah, & Wackmann, 1998; Koch & Zerback, 2013). Finally, it can be shown that—compared to more abstract information like statistics—audiences are also less critical of exemplary evidence. This may be due to the fact that it can be processed relatively easy and people desire to maintain this resource-saving cognitive processing mode. In line with this assumption is a study by Limon and Kazoleas (2004), who confronted participants with either exemplars or statistical information and demonstrated that subjects in the exemplar condition engaged considerably less in counter-arguing (see also van Laer et al., 2014). However, their argument differs somewhat from that offered by exemplification theory. According to them, narrative communication directs recipients’ attention to the story, while simultaneously reducing the cognitive capacity directed to critical thought.

Although the general notion of persuasive exemplar effects is supported by theoretical arguments, empirical research yields mixed results. Particularly, studies comparing the effects of exemplification on public opinion perception and personal attitudes find that the latter occur less frequent and are less pronounced (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997). In addition, meta-analytic results provided by Allen and Preiss (1997) point to rather weak persuasive effects of exemplar information. Some researchers assume that this lack of persuasive power can be explained by preexisting attitudes preventing message-induced attitude changes (e.g. Daschmann, 2000), because people tend to disregard information contrary to their existing attitudes (Aronson, Turner, & Carlsmith, 1963) and are more likely to counter-argue the message in such cases (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). However, following the theoretical arguments and empirical work so far, exemplars should at least exert weak persuasive effects.

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H3: Personal attitudes towards an issue will follow the opinions of exemplars towards that issue.

Although the overall persuasive effect of exemplar information is probably limited, this does not mean that under certain conditions effects cannot be more pronounced. As an important amplifier of persuasive message effects in general, scholars have particularly stressed the role of source credibility (for an overview see Pornpitakpan, 2004). Source credibility comprises two dimensions (Hovland et al., 1953). The first is *expertise* and refers to the communicator's ability to make valid statements regarding an issue, because of his competence or experience with it. *Trustworthiness*, as the second dimension, describes the "degree of confidence in the communicator's intent to communicate the assertions he considers most valid" (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21). Lefevre et al. (2012) compared the attitudinal effects of opinions expressed by experts, politicians, and ordinary citizens in the media and found that the strongest attitude changes were produced by citizen opinions. The authors argued that compared to other actors in the media, such as politicians, exemplars are considered a relatively trustworthy source of information, because they are less perceived to pursue persuasive goals. In addition, people may perceive high similarity between themselves and fellow ordinary citizens, which is also known to increase persuasive effects (Feldman, 1984; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Peter & Zerback, 2017). However, depending on their level of personal involvement in an issue, exemplars might also be perceived as having a high level of *expertise*. Particularly affected exemplars, depicted as people possessing personal experience with a topic, should receive higher expertise ratings, because personal experience is considered a cue that allows other people to assess individual competence (Bunderson & Barton, 2011). Perceived expertise, in turn, is known to be an amplifier of message-induced persuasion (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). Therefore, we expect exemplar involvement to moderate persuasive exemplar effects.

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H4: The exemplar effects on personal attitudes assumed in *H3* will be more pronounced for affected exemplars compared to unaffected exemplars. Furthermore, as described above, perceived expertise should serve as a mediator of persuasive exemplar effects:

H5: Exemplar effects on attitudes are mediated by perceived exemplar expertise. Affected exemplars are perceived to have higher levels of expertise, increasing their influence on attitudes.

To sum up, we assume that exemplar involvement functions as a dual moderator: Compared to unaffected exemplars, affected exemplars should weaken effects on public opinion perceptions, but strengthen persuasive effects on people’s personal attitudes.

Method

General Procedure

To test the hypotheses, a 3 (issue) x 2 (exemplar involvement) x 2 (exemplar opinion) between-subject experiment with additional control groups was conducted. Participants were recruited from an online access panel for social science research (SoSci Panel; Leiner 2016). The panel is noncommercial and participation is voluntarily. After being provided with an introduction, they read a short newspaper article serving as a stimulus. Following the stimulus presentation, subjects answered several questions regarding the central dependent measures. At the end of the questionnaire, all subjects were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Stimulus

When accessing the questionnaire, every participant was randomly assigned to one of three issue conditions. We choose three issues from different areas of interest to make sure that potential effects were not idiosyncratic: Parliamentary decision-making on medically assisted suicide (MAS), health insurance coverage for burnout patients (BO), and state subsidies for electric cars (ECAR). The issues selected were of social relevance and covered current topics. In addition, we ensured that every issue was of comparable personal

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importance to the participants to prevent that potential effects are not merely due to involvement differences. Research has shown that compared to less involved individuals, those who are highly involved are more likely to elaborate on a given message, for example by focusing more on the quality of the arguments included (especially in the case of persuasive messages, see Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). To test the latter, we asked our participants (depending on the experimental condition they were assigned to and before presenting the stimulus) if medically assisted suicide, burnout, or electric cars are important issues to them (5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 “totally disagree” to 5 “totally agree”). All issues were considered to be of equally high personal importance ($M_{MAS} = 4.30$, $SD = .89$; $M_{BO} = 4.08$, $SD = .93$; $M_{ECAR} = 4.15$, $SD = 1.04$).

Within each issue condition, participants were randomly presented one of five possible fictional newspaper articles that were all prepared to resemble the design of a national quality online newspaper site. Every article version started with a short introduction. After that, citizens serving as exemplars expressed their opinion on the respective issue. Except for the exemplar section, all stimulus articles covering the same topic were identical. In every article version, two ordinary citizens served as exemplars (a 32-year-old male student, a 53-year-old female employee) that only differed in the opinion they expressed and the degree of their personal involvement. *Exemplar opinion (factor 1)* was manipulated in a way that both exemplars either supported a certain opinion on the issue or opposed it. *Exemplar involvement (factor 2)* was varied by depicting all exemplars either as affected or unaffected. Subjects in the control group received the article without the exemplars. Table 1 gives an overview on the issue-specific operationalization of the experimental factors.

[Table 1 about here]

Participants

Eight-hundred and twenty-three subjects participated in the study² (56.5% females), with an average age of 41.71 years ($SD = 15.77$); 85.3% held a higher education entrance

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3 qualification (or higher formal education). Experimental groups did not significantly differ in
4
5 terms of gender, $\chi^2(14, N = 818) = 18.06, p = .20$, age, $F(14, 820) = 1.52, p = .10$, and
6
7 education, $\chi^2(84, N = 822) = 81.08, p = .57$.
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9

10 **Measures**

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12 *Perceived public opinion.* Participants were asked to assess the distribution of issue
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14 specific opinions in the general population. To do so, they used a 7-point bipolar scale ranging
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16 from 1 “The majority of Germans is clearly against [*issue-specific opinion*]” to 7 “The
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18 majority of Germans is clearly in favor of [*issue-specific opinion*].” Participants in the MAS
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20 condition had to indicate if the majority of Germans oppose or support MAS. Participants in
21
22 the BO condition had to estimate whether the majority of Germans thinks that burnout is a
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24 serious disease or not. Finally, those assigned to the ECAR condition assessed whether the
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26 majority of Germans hold a positive opinion about electric cars or not ($M_{MAS} = 4.14, SD =$
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28 $1.37; M_{BO} = 3.69, SD = 1.43; M_{ECAR} = 3.90, SD = 1.42$).
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32 *Personal attitudes.* Participants’ personal attitudes towards the issues were measured
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34 using three items per issue, which they answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1
35
36 “totally disagree” to 5 “totally agree” (e.g. “I support medically assisted suicide,” “I think
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38 burnout is a serious disease,” “I like electric cars very much.”). The three items were used to
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40 construct a scale measuring participants’ individual attitudes towards the issue, with higher
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42 values indicating a more positive attitude ($\alpha_{MAS} = .81, M = 4.36, SD = .86; \alpha_{BO} = .80, M =$
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44 $4.31, SD = .89; \alpha_{ECAR} = .73, M = 3.82, SD = .95$).
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48 *Perceived exemplar expertise.* Two items (5-point Likert scale) were used to
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50 determine the degree to which participants evaluated the exemplars’ expertise regarding
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52 MAS, burnout, and electric cars (e.g. “The persons in the article were well informed regarding
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54 [*medically assisted suicide*] [*burnout*] [*electric cars*]”). Again, all items formed issue-specific
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56 scales indicating perceived exemplar expertise ($r_{MAS} = .83, M = 3.14, SD = 1.00; r_{BO} = .86, M =$
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58 $2.65, SD = 1.18; r_{ECAR} = .82, M = 3.01, SD = 1.10$).
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Findings

Before testing the hypotheses, we checked whether subjects perceived the exemplar manipulations as intended. This was the case: First, almost all subjects correctly remembered to have seen exemplars (MAS: 87.9%, BO: 91.7%, ECAR: 93.1%) or not (MAS: 94.7%, BO: 92.5%, ECAR: 91.8%) in the respective conditions. Those who indicated to have seen exemplars also correctly recalled their opinion (7-point bipolar scale ranging from 1 “The persons in the article clearly opposed [issue specific opinion]” to 7 “The persons in the article clearly supported [issue specific opinion]”). In all issue conditions, participants who were provided with an article containing exemplars opposing the issue specific opinion ($M_{MAS} = 1.58$, $SD = 1.44$, $M_{BO} = 1.73$, $SD = 1.31$, $M_{ECAR} = 2.10$, $SD = 1.12$) significantly differed from those in the support condition ($M_{MAS} = 6.78$, $SD = .57$, $M_{BO} = 6.65$, $SD = .88$, $M_{ECAR} = .682$, $SD = .61$), MAS, $F(1, 186) = 1081.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .85$; BO: $F(1, 197) = 947.75$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .83$; ECAR: $F(1, 213) = 1411.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .87$. In addition, the means obtained differed significantly from the scale midpoint (4), indicating a successful manipulation not only in a relative, but also in an absolute sense ($p < .001$ for all issues). Finally, almost all of the participants remembered the degree of the exemplars’ personal involvement. Of those who saw unaffected exemplars, 96.0% (MAS), 94.7% (BO), 98.1% (ECAR) correctly reported exemplar non-involvement. The same was true for participants receiving affected exemplars (MAS: 94.3%, BO: 94.1%, ECAR: 100.0%).

Exemplar Effects on Public Opinion Perception

H1 predicted that public opinion perception would follow exemplar opinion, and *H2* stated that this effect would be moderated by exemplar involvement. We performed a factorial ANOVA including stimulus issue, exemplar involvement, and exemplar opinion as independent factors. Results show a significant main effect for exemplar opinion, $F(1, 643) = 7.71$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .01$, indicating that participants who were confronted with exemplars voicing support for an issue-specific opinion also perceived more public support for it ($M =$

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4.12, $SD = 1.42$) compared to those reading about exemplars voicing the opposite opinion ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.43$).³ In addition, the interaction between stimulus issue and exemplar opinion was not significant, indicating that the main effect of exemplar opinion was independent of the respective issue, $F(2, 643) = .77$, $p = .46$, $\eta^2 = .00$. *H1* was therefore supported. Table 2 shows that this effect is partly caused by an interaction between both experimental factors: The influence of exemplar opinion was more pronounced when participants saw unaffected exemplars, $F(1, 643) = 9.58$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Participants who saw unaffected exemplars supporting a certain position saw more public support for this opinion ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.37$) compared to those who saw opposing exemplars ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.45$). No such difference was found between the support ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.42$) and opposing conditions ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.42$), when exemplars were affected. In other words, the effect of exemplar opinion on public opinion perception was restricted to unaffected exemplars, supporting *H2*. This principal interaction pattern was statistically independent from the issue presented, $F(2, 643) = .86$, $p = .43$, $\eta^2 = .00$.

[Table 2 about here]

Exemplar Effects on Personal Attitudes

Regarding personal attitudes, we predicted that exemplars would exert persuasive effects by altering participants' attitudes (*H3*) and that this effect would be moderated by exemplar involvement (*H4*). In fact, this held not true for personal attitudes, $F(1, 652) = 2.09$, $p = .15$, $\eta^2 = .00$. As Table 3 shows, regardless of the exemplars' opinion towards an issue, all attitude measures were more or less on the same level. This pattern also did not change between issue conditions, $F(1, 652) = .71$, $p = .49$, $\eta^2 = .00$, thus, *H3* had to be rejected. In addition, we find no significant moderator effect of exemplar involvement, $F(1, 652) = .174$, $p = .68$, $\eta^2 = .00$. In other words, affected exemplars did not exert a stronger effect on participants' personal opinions than unaffected exemplars. Again, this was the case for all issues, $F(1, 652) = 1.01$, $p = .37$, $\eta^2 = .00$. Therefore, we had to reject *H4*.

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[Table 3 about here]

Although we were not able to detect a persuasive effect, it is still possible that affected exemplars were perceived to have a higher level of issue-specific expertise. This effect is part of *H5* that predicted a mediation process, in that participants tend to ascribe higher levels of issue-specific expertise to affected exemplars, which in turn leads to a change in attitudes. To test this assumption, we computed two mediation models (using STATA 14) that are depicted in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

If the mediation assumption holds, participants should first rate affected exemplars higher in terms of expertise than unaffected exemplars. Figure 1 shows that this was true for all issue conditions and irrespective of the exemplars' opinion, MAS: $b_{oppose} = 1.03, p < .001$, $b_{support} = .59, p < .001$; BO: $b_{oppose} = 1.10, p < .001$, $b_{support} = 1.17, p < .001$; ECAR: $b_{oppose} = 1.90, p < .001$, $b_{support} = 1.45, p < .001$.

However, the path coefficients indicate that only in some cases perceived expertise was also positively associated with individual attitudes. This was true for burnout in the opposing condition, $b_{oppose} = -.32, p < .001$, and for medically assisted suicide, $b_{support} = .28, p < .01$, as well as electric cars, $b_{support} = .37, p < .001$, in the supporting conditions. Put differently, opposing and supporting exemplars were both perceived more competent when personally affected (irrespective of the issue), but only in three cases this increased the persuasive effects of the exemplars. To determine the effect of exemplar involvement on participants' attitudes via perceived expertise, we calculated the indirect effects for the three cases mentioned above, which all proved to be statistically significant, BO: $b_{oppose, indirect} = -.35, p < .01$, MAS: $b_{support, indirect} = .16, p < .05$, ECAR: $b_{support, indirect} = .53, p < .01$. Thus, *H5* only found partial support.

This result seems somewhat of a paradox, since we already saw in Table 3 and the corresponding ANOVAs that no interaction effect between exemplar involvement and exemplar opinion was observed. The reason for this contradicting pattern becomes clear when

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looking at the direct effects of exemplar involvement on attitudes (Figure 1): In two of the cases where indirect effects were significant, exemplar involvement also had a counteracting direct effect on attitudes, MAS: $b_{support, direct} = -.21, p = .21$, ECAR: $b_{support, direct} = -.41, p < .01$, resulting in non-significant total effects, MAS: $b_{support_total} = -.04, p = .78$, ECAR: $b_{support_total} = .12, p = .54$. This partly explains the lacking mean differences in our initial ANOVA.

Discussion

The present study, for the first time, examined the role of exemplar involvement as a moderator of exemplar effects on public opinion perceptions and attitudes. Investigating the differential effects of affected and unaffected exemplars is important, since both types are an integral part of everyday news coverage and, therefore, inhere a great potential to influence people’s judgments (Kleemans et al., 2015). Moreover, affected exemplars are used in strategic communication, particularly health campaigns, that employ citizens with certain conditions to influence people’s health-related attitudes and behaviors (Zillmann, 2006).

Our results clearly demonstrate the expected exemplar effect on public opinion perception. When exemplars supported issue specific opinions on medically assisted suicide, burnout, or electric cars, subjects saw more support for these opinions in the public. More importantly, this effect was moderated by exemplar involvement in the expected direction: Compared to unaffected exemplars, affected citizens inhibited the effects of exemplar opinion on public opinion perceptions. Yet, no effects on participants’ attitudes could be observed. A closer examination of the underlying mechanisms revealed that this was in part due to a suppression effect: As expected, affected exemplars were perceived to have considerably more issue-specific expertise, which in some cases indeed led to more positive or negative attitudes (following the exemplars’ opinion). However, this indirect effect of exemplar involvement was countered by a direct effect, compensating for the first one. Put differently, while exemplar involvement leads to an increase in perceived expertise, which in turn

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enhanced persuasive effects, at the same time exemplar involvement seems to hamper persuasive effects directly.

What do these results tell us about the mediating role of exemplar expertise? First, it seems that perceived expertise is a less important mediator than expected. In the case of opposing exemplars, perceived expertise had a mediating effect only on attitudes in the burnout condition. In the case of supporting exemplars, perceived expertise served as a mediator, resulting in more positive attitudes regarding medically assisted suicide and electric cars. Second, the question remains as to why the suppressor effect occurs and what mechanism is responsible for it. Drawing from literature on persuasion, we put forward three possible explanations, all involving additional mediators. First, it is possible that participants have perceived affected exemplars to pursue strong self-interests regarding the issue they talk about and therefore considered them less trustworthy. We tested this assumption by including a scale measuring trustworthiness into our mediation models ($\alpha_{MAS} = .73$, $\alpha_{BO} = .77$, $\alpha_{ECAR} = .86$).⁴ Results show that affected exemplars were actually perceived more trustworthy compared to unaffected ones, although the effect was relatively weak and only observed when exemplars opposed an issue-specific position, $b_{oppose} = .27$, $p < .05$. Consequently, perceived trustworthiness was not responsible for the suppressor effect.

A second explanation could be that affected exemplars are perceived to be less representative for the general population, an assumption that is supported by the moderation effects on perceived public opinion in our study. This altered perception of public opinion in turn can affect personal attitudes, because it represents a form of social influence (Martin & Hewstone, 2008). To test this assumption, we included public opinion perception as a second mediator in our existing models. The results show that the effect of exemplar involvement is not mediated by public opinion perception, since the latter is not associated with participants' attitudes, $b_{oppose} = .02$, $p = .50$, $b_{support} = .02$, $p = .65$, which eliminates it as a possible suppressor as well. A final explanation could be that participants perceived unaffected

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exemplars to be more similar to themselves than affected exemplars. This seems plausible since—at least in our case—affected exemplars represented very specific parts of the population (terminally ill people, people who have experienced a burnout, people possessing an electric car). Persuasion research has repeatedly shown that the similarity between the source of a message and its receiver is an important moderator of persuasive effects, with similar sources exerting stronger effects compared to dissimilar ones (Perloff, 2010, p. 176-178). Hence, the lower similarity in the case of affected exemplars could have hampered persuasive effects. Unfortunately, we did not measure perceived similarity, so we could not test this explanation. A further detailed analysis of the counteracting mediation effect is an interesting theoretical and empirical task for future research.

What can we learn from the current study? A first contribution of this paper is a theoretical one: The examination of affected vs. unaffected exemplars made it necessary to describe different strands of research that deal with individuals presented in the news and elaborate on their relation. Until now, most publications have merely touched upon this theoretical underpinning. Ostfeld and Mutz (2014) sum it up by stating: “A growing body of evidence from multiple traditions within the social sciences is frankly confusing in what it suggests about the implications of this form of coverage” (p. 54). The most obvious difference that we focused on is between single individual cases used in episodic framing studies and vox pops as two different forms of exemplars. Exemplars used to constitute episodic frames illuminate a social problem from the specific perspective of an affected individual (by describing the fate of a single person) and therefore are usually relatively detailed. Although research in exemplification also examines involved individuals, a large part of it also deals with individuals without any personal experience or attachment to the issue at hand.

Since exemplars that are used to build episodic frames are often presented in a narrative way, their persuasive effect should be stronger compared to brief vox pops. Persuasive effects triggered by narrative communication typically rely on transportation, identification, and

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reduced counter-arguing (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010), processes that take place if the message involves persons or events embedded in a cohesive and coherent story. The affected exemplars in our newspaper articles barely matched these criteria since they only gave a short opinion statement accompanied by a brief cue to their personal involvement in the issue. Consequently, it seems reasonable to assume that the narrative persuasion mechanisms were not triggered or may even have caused the observed suppressor effects. Consequently, we urge researchers in these areas to carefully distinguish between exemplar types and their specific characteristics and integrate literature that might come along under a different label, but offer substantial contributions to the theoretical foundation of their study. The differentiation between affected and unaffected exemplars implemented in our study is one step in this direction.

A second implication is an empirical one with practical consequences: Our results are in line with a growing body of research showing that brief exemplars are powerful in altering perceptions of public opinion, but hardly capable of influencing recipients' attitudes (e.g. Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997; Peter & Zerback, 2017). Does this mean that former warnings prompting journalists to select exemplars carefully are exaggerated? Even though the present results might lead to this conclusion, we think that especially the effects on public opinion perception are not to be underestimated. Depending on the issue, perceptions of what other people think can affect our own opinions and behavior as other researchers have confirmed on numerous occasions. Especially when people decide whether to speak out publicly on morally loaded issues, they tend to consider current public opinion distributions that are derived from exemplar distributions (e.g. Zerback & Fawzi, 2017; Perry & Gonzenbach, 2000).

Third, the results presented here are relevant for the field of health communication in various aspects. Although exemplars were presented in the context of a newspaper article, results indicate that if health messages pursue persuasive goals (i.e. altering citizens'

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attitudes), they should employ affected rather than unaffected citizens as communicators as they are associated with more issue-specific expertise that might enhance persuasive effects. However, as our study implies, merely adding short opinion statements of affected individuals might not be enough to transport the message; in order to enhance persuasive effects, narratives that tell a story about a person affected—as it is normally the case in episodic framing—might be more efficient.

Taken together, it seems that using affected exemplars could be most effective in transporting (health) messages, while having less “side effects,” such as distorted perceptions of public opinion. Certainly, additional studies are in order to back up this assumption. The results also show how important it is to distinguish between different types of exemplars and the underlying mechanisms of their effectiveness. Consequently, there is a need to integrate different research traditions that look at ordinary citizens in the media and integrate exemplification, episodic framing and narratives within a larger framework. This also comprises efforts to determine the effects of different sources in health communication. Since in our case, affected exemplars did not exert a persuasive effect, other actors may be more efficient, e.g. experts, or relatives of the affected person as they might be easier to relate to.

Of course, the study also has limitations. Like in most experiments, external validity is challenged by the fact that certain characteristics of the study’s design only partly represent the actual variety of exemplification used by journalists. One problem in this respect may be the one-sided presentation of exemplar opinions. Although exemplar opinion was varied systematically, all exemplars within a single opinion condition always advocated the same position on a particular issue. This of course represents only one possible opinion distribution. In reality, journalists can choose to present more balanced opinion distributions, reflecting a greater diversity of views. However, research shows that the use of one-sided exemplars is common among journalists. In fact, a recent content analysis of television news from 2003 to

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2013 in Flanders shows that unbalanced exemplar presentations, depicting only one point of view on an issue, occurred in 73 percent of all news items analyzed (Beckers et al., 2016).

Another limitation derives from the fact that the influence of exemplar involvement on perceived expertise is possibly restricted to certain issues. Although in our case affected exemplars increased perceived expertise considerably across all issue conditions, there might be areas where this relationship does not exist. This is because perceived expertise is not exclusively deduced from existing experience, but also from other cues including education, professional training, status, age, language, or appearance (Bunderson & Barton, 2011). Depending on the issue, recipients might weight such cues quite differently when judging expertise.

Besides these limitations, the study confirms the moderating role of exemplar involvement in exemplification effects. In times of frequent and increasing use of affected and unaffected citizen exemplars by journalists, this result sure is of particular relevance. Ultimately, it should provide further evidence for journalists that they need to be cautious when selecting exemplars, as their distribution, opinions, and features can alter perceptions of social reality and personal judgments of the audience.

¹ We use the term persuasion to describe the process behind the effects of exemplars on recipients' attitudes. By using the term, we do not imply that journalists necessarily pursue a persuasive goal when they use exemplars in their coverage.

² A post-hoc power analysis indicated that given the underlying experimental design and sample size, main and interaction effects can be detected with sufficient power (Cohen, 1988): small main effects ($f = .10$, $1-\beta = .82$), medium main effects ($f = .25$, $1-\beta = .99$), large main effects ($f = .40$, $1-\beta = .99$), small interaction effects ($f = .10$, $1-\beta = .73$), medium interaction effects ($f = .25$, $1-\beta = .99$), large interaction effects ($f = .40$, $1-\beta = .99$). Power calculations are based on the following parameters: error probability $\alpha = .05$, numerator $df = 1$, number of

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groups $k = 12$. Effect sizes were calculated using the G*Power 3.1.9.2 software package (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007).

³ Means not included in Table 2.

⁴ The scale consisted of two items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “totally disagree” to 5 “totally agree.” The items read: “The persons in the article were trustworthy,” and “The persons in the article were reliable in what they said”.

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Table 1

*Operationalization of the experimental factors***1. Medically assisted suicide*****Exemplar involvement****Affected:* Exemplars are citizens suffering from a terminal disease.*Unaffected:* Exemplars are citizens (no further information was given).***Exemplar opinion****Support:* Exemplars express support for making use of MAS themselves.*Opposition:* Exemplars express opposition against making use of MAS themselves.**2. Burnout*****Exemplar involvement****Affected:* Exemplars are citizens having experienced a burnout in the past.*Unaffected:* Exemplars are citizens (no further information was given).***Exemplar opinion****Support:* Exemplars claim that burnout is a serious disease.*Opposition:* Exemplars doubt that burnout is a serious disease.**3. Electric cars*****Exemplar involvement****Affected:* Exemplars are citizens possessing an electric car.*Unaffected:* Exemplars are citizens (no further information was given).***Exemplar opinion****Support:* Exemplars express a positive opinion about electric cars.*Opposition:* Exemplars express a negative opinion about electric cars.

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Table 2

Public opinion perception across exemplar conditions (means and standard deviations)

	Unaffected		Affected		Controls
	Pro	Contra	Pro	Contra	No exemplars
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
MAS (n = 269)	4.61 (1.23)	4.14 (1.38)	4.06 (1.47)	4.02 (1.28)	3.89 (1.40)
Burnout (n = 268)	4.11 (1.31)	3.38 (1.61)	3.59 (1.32)	3.96 (1.49)	3.55 (1.29)
Electric cars (n = 277)	4.42 (1.53)	3.67 (1.23)	3.86 (1.46)	3.63 (1.46)	3.96 (1.31)
Total	4.40 (1.37)	3.70 (1.45)	3.83 (1.42)	3.85 (1.42)	3.80 (1.34)
Diff. means	0.70		-0.02		---

Table 3

Attitudes across exemplar conditions (means and standard deviations)

	Unaffected		Affected		Controls
	Pro	Contra	Pro	Contra	No exemplars
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
MAS (n = 271)	4.44 (.81)	4.32 (.88)	4.37 (.87)	4.49 (.73)	4.41 (.79)
Burnout (n = 271)	4.29 (1.09)	4.30 (1.00)	4.45 (.99)	4.00 (1.17)	4.23 (1.08)
Electric cars (n = 281)	3.86 (1.13)	3.82 (.97)	4.07 (.93)	3.95 (.92)	3.90 (.91)
Total	4.20 (1.04)	4.13 (.98)	4.30 (.94)	4.14 (.98)	4.19 (.95)
Diff. means	0.07		0.16		---

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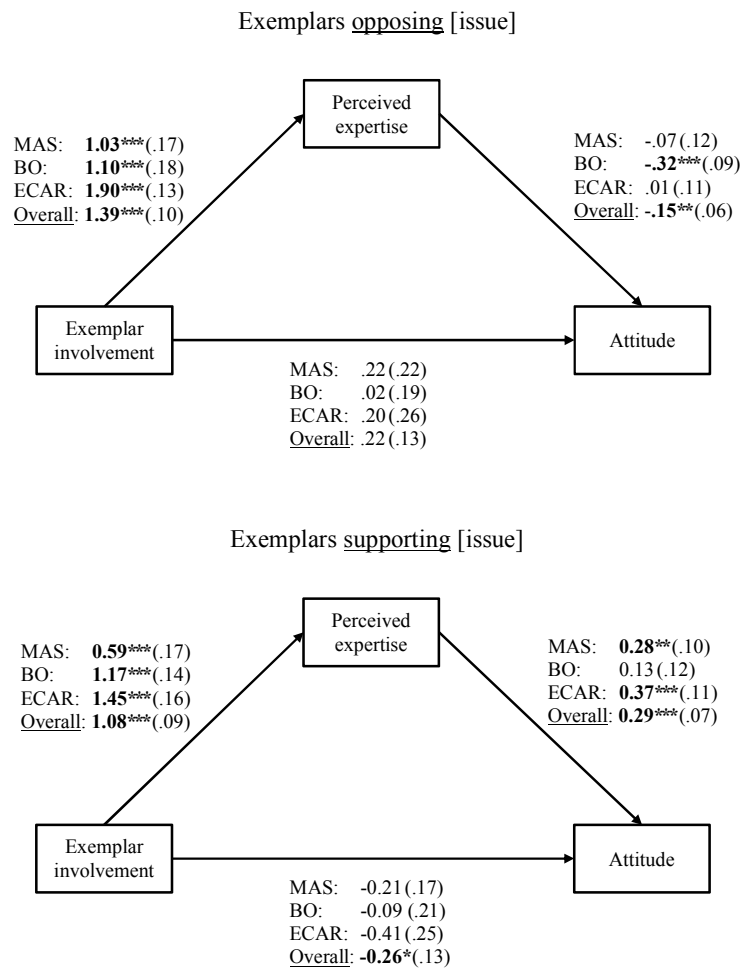


Figure 1

Perceived exemplar expertise as a mediator of exemplar effects on attitudes

To perform the mediation analyses, the control group was excluded. Exemplar involvement was dummy-coded (0 = unaffected exemplars, 1 = affected exemplars). Exemplar opinion was also dummy-coded (0 = exemplars opposing the issue specific position, 1 = exemplars supporting issue specific position). Coefficients are unstandardized path coefficients, standard errors are in parentheses, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.